

The Preterit Versus the Imperfect

Getting the “imperfect” perfect.

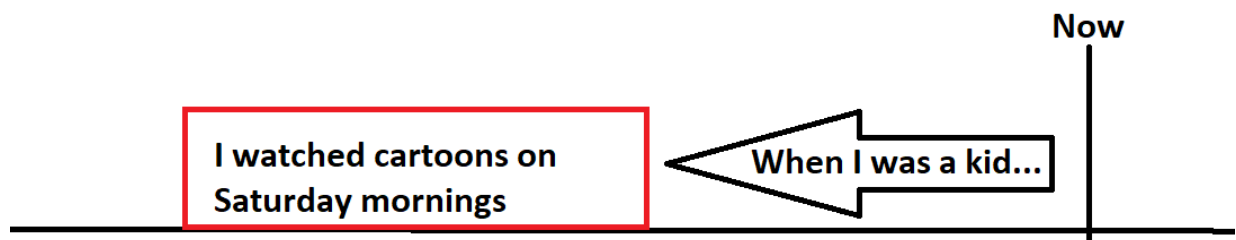
The preterit

As we said in our [resource on the form and function of the “preterit,”](#) the “preterit”¹ is what we use to talk about past events that have a definitive endpoint.

For example, if I wanted to talk about when I had breakfast today, I would use the preterit, both in English and in Spanish, because this event has a definitive endpoint. **Here’s one way to visualize this** using verb timelines:



Actions that take place many times over a specified period of time are **not** appropriate for the use of the preterit in Spanish. Instead, we would use the imperfect for the following example:



This action (watching cartoons) happened over **many** Saturday mornings “when I was a kid.” In this sentence, in Spanish, we **cannot** use the preterit form because the preterit is used **only for activities that have a single definitive endpoint**.

This is where the “imperfect” comes in.

¹ Sometimes, “preterit” is called “perfective” in grammar, so you can think of it as almost the opposite of the imperfect in a sense.

But why “imperfect”?

One definition of “perfection” is that something is “complete”. In grammar, you can think of the “imperfect” as something that hasn’t been completed, in a sense, even if it happened in the past.

For example, the action of watching cartoons in the timeline above is something that happened in the past, but the specific endpoint is not clear. We cannot look back on a specific Saturday and say that is when we stopped watching cartoons on Saturdays.

When your Connect homework asks you to use the imperfect, this is the meaning that it is referring to.

The “Used To” Test

One helpful way to intuitively figure out whether the correct answer to your homework question is the imperfect is to try out the “Used To” Test.

Here’s an example of a sentence you might see in your homework:

Ella me _____ (conocer) en una fiesta.

You have two options here. Either the blank is *conoció* (the preterit) or it is *conocía* (the imperfect).

Here’s how you can be 100% certain which one is the right choice:

Step 1: figure out the meaning of the sentence.

In English, this sentence means, “She met me at a party.”

Step 1, done!

Step 2: insert “used to” before the verb in your translation

The verb here is “met”, so let’s put the words “used to” before the verb to make:

She used to meet me at a party.

Step 2, done!

Step 3: ask yourself, “Does this sound weird?”

If the answer to that question is **yes**, then you should use the preterit.

If the answer to that question is **no**, then you should use the imperfect.

Step 3, done!

² Technically, “imperfect” is not a tense but rather an aspect of verbs in all languages. It describes actions that have not been completed, so in a sense, all present tense verbs are imperfect as well, but for the sake of simplicity, most Spanish curriculum narrowly refers to the imperfect as a second past tense.

But why does this test work?

If we think about it logically, the sentence “She met me at a party” is describing one incident with a single definitive endpoint. We didn’t know each other, she met me, and then the action of meeting each other was over.

This is the nature of some verbs in all languages, like “meeting someone” in English and Spanish. By nature, you do not usually meet someone repeatedly over a given period of time. Ultimately, some meanings of verbs are just prone to an imperfective aspect.

Forming the imperfect

In some ways, forming the imperfect is a lot simpler than other conjugations in Spanish.

Just like in any other conjugation in Spanish (with the exception of the future tense), the conjugations are divided between the two verb classes in Spanish: -ar verbs and -er/-ir verbs. Better yet, conjugations for the imperfect in Spanish are more generalizable than other endings.

Forming the Imperfect for -ar Verbs

The general imperfect ending for -ar verbs is *-aba*.

	<u>Imperfect</u>
yo	<u>hablaba</u>
tú	<u>hablabas</u>
él/ella/Ud.	<u>hablaba</u>
nosotros	<u>hablábamos</u>
vosotros	<u>hablabais</u>
ellos/ellas/Uds.	<u>hablaban</u>

You should notice that the conjugations for “yo” and “él/ella/usted” are the same. This means that this set of conjugations is technically simpler than others. For the rest of the pronouns, you’ll add the typical endings we associate with them: for tú it is the -s ending, for nosotros it is the -mos ending, and for ellos/ellas/ustedes it is the -n ending.

Beware of the nosotros ending, though, because there is always an accent on the first á of the -aba ending.

Forming the Imperfect for -er and -ir verbs

Similar to the -ar verbs, there's only one general ending that fits onto all of the imperfect conjugations for -er/-ir verbs: -ía.

Here is an example of a common -er/-ir verb:

	<u>Imperfect</u>
yo	<u>comía</u>
tú	<u>comías</u>
él/ella/Ud.	<u>comía</u>
nosotros	<u>comíamos</u>
vosotros	<u>comíais</u>
ellos/ellas/Uds.	<u>comían</u>

The process for conjugating is essentially the same for -er/-ir verbs as it is for the -ar verbs we just talked about.

After you add the -ía to the root, you add any person markers like you normally would for conjugating in Spanish.

Beware of the “i” with a tilde! That’s important to the meaning and pronunciation of these forms.

Summary

The hardest part about the imperfect aspect is the meaning. We talk about it as if it is a second past tense, but really, it is an aspect of expressions both in the past and the present since the present is never truly complete or finished. Luckily, forming the imperfect is the easier part about using it in Spanish. You don’t have to worry about changing the ending for “yo” or for “él/ella”.

If you are ever unsure, try out the “Used To” Test to determine whether the preterit or the imperfect is appropriate. Here’s a [low stakes quiz](https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/64/preterite-vs-imperfect-in-spanish)³ you can do to practice your understanding of this topic.

³ If you’re using the printed handout of this resource, the website referred to here is <https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/64/preterite-vs-imperfect-in-spanish>